



Pengcheng Zhou

University of Sheffield

## **Conifers and Power: The Political and Sacred Symbolism of Trees in Chinese History**

**Thursday 15 May 2025**

**6.00pm BST**

*Broadcast on Zoom only*

Throughout Chinese history conifers have played a vital role in shaping sacred landscapes, imperial gardens, and commemorative sites. More than just natural elements, these trees were embedded in political ideologies, religious rituals, and cultural identity. This research explores how conifers were venerated and instrumentalised to assert power, establish territorial authority, and reinforce sacred traditions.

The study begins with the She Tree which, serving as sacred symbols of territorial governance, were central to agrarian rituals and imperial authority. The second example concerns the Welcoming Pine on Mount Huangshan. First valued in Daoist aesthetics for its resilience, in the twentieth century state-led cultural narratives redefined it as a national symbol of hospitality. Next this study explores the Five Da Fu Pine of Mount Taishan which illustrate the historical relationship between imperial authority and sacred mountains. Qin Emperor Shihuang's ritual act of conferring a noble title

under the tree symbolised an assertion of state power over Mount Taishan's theocracy.

Finally the paper discusses the conifers surrounding the mausoleum of Mao Zedong, built in 1977. Following the imperial precedent of using conifers to convey longevity and ideological permanence, the mausoleum was framed by various conifers, reinforcing narratives of national unity and revolutionary continuity.

This research highlights the broader role of conifers as both physical and ideological constructs in shaping China's historical landscapes. It contributes to discussions on political ecology, sacred landscapes, and the use of conifers in constructing historical narratives and national identity.

**Pengcheng Zhou** is in the final year of his PhD, writing his thesis and seeking opportunities to publish. During his undergraduate studies in Landscape Architecture in Hangzhou he conducted research into the coniferous landscape of the arboretum at Hangzhou Botanical Garden. This led to a Master's degree in Landscape Management at the University of Sheffield, where he studied the implementation of heritage tree policies in Hangzhou. In the course of his earlier studies Pengcheng found that the topic of conifers and their significance in Chinese landscapes had not been explored in sufficient depth, particularly with regard to their vital place in Chinese gardens and sacred sites. His PhD research has been the result.

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